

Mitchell's Musings 12-19-11: Model Worker

One of our former doctoral students at UCLA writes an advice-to-employees column in the *Los Angeles Daily News*. Employees with problems at work ask for his counsel on various workplace issues. Recently, the following question and answer appeared:

*By Ken Lloyd, Columnist
12/14/11 Los Angeles Daily News*

Q: When I was named Employee of the Month last month, I was so excited. Now, I'm not sure. I sense that some of my fellow employees are mad at me, and when I sit down for lunch with them, the conversation gets quiet, and I feel like an intruder. I'm not sure what to do about this. If I had a choice, I think I'd give the award back.

A: First, congratulations for being selected Employee of the Month. In spite of what you are currently experiencing, this is a terrific honor, and it is unfortunate that you would even think about giving it back. Many employees enjoy having friends at work, until their friends earn an honor or award. At that point, feelings of jealousy, competition, and unfairness can come into play. To deal with this, you can certainly discuss your feelings with your co-workers. If you let them talk and vent a little, you may be able to put the matter to rest.

Full column at http://www.dailynews.com/business/ci_19551104

Reading this exchange reminded me of Alexey Stakhanov. Who is that? Back in the 1930s, you wouldn't have needed to ask - as this *Time* magazine cover indicates:

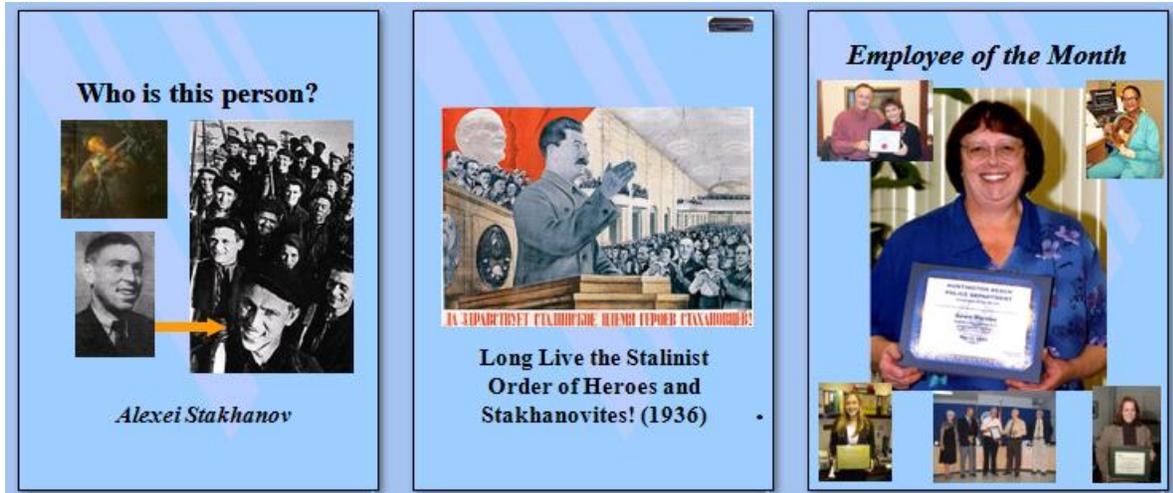


Stakhanov, a Soviet coal miner who supposedly set production records, was set up as a model worker by the authorities and heralded by Stalin himself as someone all workers in the Soviet Union should emulate. Not only did he make the cover of *Time*, he was also featured in a *March of Time* newsreel available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bnvt6q8OcFA>

The practice of setting up model workers was imitated after World War II in Communist Eastern Europe and – remarkably – was parodied in the Polish film “Man of Marble” made in 1977 well before the Solidarity revolt or the collapse of the Soviet system.¹ An excerpt from that film can be seen here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQfJl3wYL5g>

In my labor markets class as part of a unit on productivity and motivation, I used to put three PowerPoint slides on the screen in succession, with the *March of Time* newsreel/video played after the second slide:



Of course, no one knew the answer to the question on the first slide. I would explain with the illustration on the second slide. The class would be amused with the idea that such demonstrations would be expected to stimulate productivity. Then I would show the third slide, with various employees of the month pulled off the web, to illustrate that the technique is hardly a foreign one, or even a communist one – which takes me back to the question-and-answer column concerning a frustrated employee of the month.²

Certainly, after the fall of European communism, it became clear that Stakhanov-type propaganda, while it undoubtedly inspired some True Believers, was viewed with skepticism by ordinary workers. At a conference in Budapest in the early 1990s, I talked with a British doctoral student who was studying the motivational techniques that had been used in Hungarian factories during the communist era. Following Soviet practice, he had found, Hungarian factory managers would select model workers and tout their

¹ Apparently, the film was first released by the Polish authorities omitting sections in which the model worker turns out to have been later betrayed by the system. The complete version of the movie is now available. See <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/31196/Man-of-Marble/overview>.

² My guess is that the Soviets copied the model worker approach from the west, indeed, from the U.S. Stakhanov was likely an economy-wide version of the more micro employee-of-the-month concept. Under communist ideology, capitalism was the most advanced stage of economic activity in the world but it would inevitably collapse into still-more-advanced communism. In the interim, the Soviets consciously emulated what they perceived as the latest capitalist practices such as Taylorism, piece rates, etc.

supposed accomplishments to the other workers. The problem was that the models became pariahs among their fellow employees. They would last only a short period in that role – some were apparently assaulted – but the deal would be that after a brief time as models, they would be promoted into management. Given that history, it is probable that the factory managers were aware that the model worker approach was ineffective but they had to go along with practices ordered from above.

So what about the employee of the month award in current usage? Has anyone ever studied what effect such selections have on worker productivity? Note that if a workplace selects an employee of the month, there must be twelve of them a year, twenty-four in two years, thirty-six in three years, etc. How special could all of these employees really be?³ Maybe the true reason the employee-of-the-month who wrote for advice was having trouble was not just jealousy of fellow workers. Maybe his/her fellow workers knew that the supposed model was really not all that special and just was selected because someone had to be. And maybe – just maybe – there are many other standard human resource practices that need to be questioned.

³ A point addressed on the Simpsons: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7mjg3_the-simpsons-employee-of-the-month_shortfilms